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ABSTRACT

Concern about retention and attrition rates in higher education have increased over the years and efforts to identify and treat potential dropouts have grown considerably. Studies investigating the retention and attrition of community college students have found specific characteristics related to outcomes, including full- or part-time attendance, age, employment status, grade point average, being a member of an ethnic minority other than Asian, family obligations, financial concerns, and gender. Since determining predictive characteristics can be difficult, intervention strategies represent an alternative way of approaching retention and attrition and may have greater impact in the long run. Strategies that are widely used and demonstrate the greatest impact include orientation programs, mentoring programs, and multiple strategy approaches combining various efforts. Studies have shown that completion of an orientation program promotes and improves student performance. Faculty and peer mentoring programs aim to improve teacher-student interaction through the use of guidebooks, workshops, tutorial programs, and other academic and social support strategies. Multiple strategy efforts in place at community colleges include the use of campus-wide handbooks of student retention strategies; women's centers to provide support to non-traditional, female students; freshman seminars to promote supportive relationships among students and student-faculty interaction; and the implementation of college funded work-study for on-campus employment. Contains 16 references. (TGI)

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Digest

April 1996 EDO-JC-96-06

Retention-Attrition in the Nineties

by Florence B. Brawer

Concern about retention and attrition rates in higher education have increased over the years. While the statistics remain fairly constant, approximately 50 percent of the freshmen enrolled in colleges and universities drop out before completing their programs. Efforts to identify and treat potential dropouts have grown considerably.

This Digest updates earlier studies by concentrating on ERIC documents of the 1990s. It discusses the types of students who take early leave of their programs as compared with those who remain, the reasons why students leave and devotes special attention to intervention strategies that some colleges offer in their attempts to encourage retention.

Characteristics of Persisters and Non-Persisters

Studies investigating retention and attrition of students in community colleges gather data on student demographics in order to discover the typology of students who are likely to remain in school and those who are at risk of dropping out. Many studies in this area attempt to discover and pinpoint the characteristics of persisters and non-persisters. Moore (1995) and Windham (1994) found that full-time attendance at the college is the most prevalent characteristic of persisters. Interestingly, the most prevalent characteristic among studies of non-persisters is part-time attendance (Feldman, 1993; Price, 1993). San Juan College in Mexico found that in 1991 and 1992, Fall to Fall persistence rates for part-time degree seeking students were 42 percent and 35 percent as compared to 59 percent and 46 percent for full-timers (Moore, 1995). Feldman (1993), Windham (1994), Price (1993) and Lanni (1992) also reported a higher dropout rate among part-time students.

Age as a defining characteristic shows conflicting reports in the research. Typically, studies report persisters to be younger students and conversely non-persisters to be older students (Windham, 1994; Price, 1993). However, an investigation of pre-enrollment variables as predictors of one-year retention of 1,140 first time students at one community college found the risk of dropping out was associated with young students between 20-24 years old (Feldman, 1993). Conversely, Mohammadi (1994) in a study at Patrick Henry Community College in Virginia found attrition rates after one year to be higher for those students in the age ranges of 23-35 and 45-50. Other attributes found to influence students' decision to leave the college before completing their program or degree include: full-time employment, low grade-point average, being a member of an ethnic minority other than Asian, family obligations, financial concerns, and female gender (Bonham & Luckie, 1993; Lewallen, 1993).

Intervention Strategies

Identifying the characteristics of persisters and non-persisters is a difficult task. Focusing on intervention strategies represents an alternative way of approaching retention and attrition and in the long-run may have a greater impact. Intervention strategies in which colleges engage take on a variety of styles and types such as orientation and mentoring programs, and multiple strategy approaches.

Orientation Programs

These types of programs are one of the most common intervention strategies. They have been found to provide students with information essential to their academic socialization: 1) descriptions of college program offerings; (2) the college's expectations for students; (3) information about assistance and services for examining interests, values, and abilities; (4) encouragement to establish working relationships with faculty; (5) information about services that help with adjustment to college; and (6) financial aid information (Coll and VonSeggern, 1991). Glass and Garrett (1995), in a study of four North Carolina community colleges, found that completion of an orientation program during the first term of enrollment promotes and improves student performance regardless of age, gender, race, major, entrance exam scores, or employment status (Glass and Garrett, 1995). Valencia Community College in Florida has developed an extended orientation course that focuses on student success (Nelson, 1993). Between 1987 and 1992, 81 percent of the students who enrolled in the extended orientation course passed their first-term courses, compared to 56 percent of the students enrolled in other college preparatory courses and 67 percent of all other students. After four terms, 65 percent of the students who enrolled in the extended orientation course were still enrolled at the college (Nelson, 1993).

Mentoring Programs

Another strategy successfully used by some community colleges is peer and faculty mentoring. Santa-Rita (1993) presents a guidebook that recommends methods to improve teacher-student interaction in the classroom as a means of increasing student retention. The guidebook introduces eight major systems of classroom management, typologies of student behavior, and information about interaction patterns, behaviors, and

options for coping with various classroom situations. Another program focusing on teacher-student relationships is Coffeyville Community College in Kansas. In an effort to retain students and improve advisement, this college instituted the SELECT Advisor programs in the summer of 1993. Becoming a "Master Advisor" involves attending a summer workshop, helping with student orientations, teaching one section of college orientation, and mentoring 10 at-risk students. A September 1994 retention report on all Fall 1993 freshmen indicated that the at-risk students in the SELECT program had a 73% retention rate, compared to a 70% retention rate for students enrolled in orientation classes and a 42% retention rate for students not enrolled in orientation classes (Clark and others, 1995). Similarly, Valencia Community College discovered that when faculty mentoring was combined with an orientation course the return rate increased by 10% beyond the rate of enrolling in an orientation course only (Nelson, 1993).

Peer mentoring programs also have been found to be effective in retaining students. In order to improve retention rates, the ALANA mentoring program at Saint Clair County Community College concentrates on identity issues facing Asian, Latin, African, and Native American freshman. In this program, peer mentors provide social and academic support, encourage students to think critically, and assist them with academic choices (Mueller, 1993). The PLACe tutorial program at Miramar College in California is dedicated to empowering students to attain educational success (Fink and Carrasquillo, 1994). In spring 1992, developmental English and math students who used PLACe services had a higher success rate (58 and 52 percent) than those who did not (37 and 41 percent). Retention strategies applied at Canada's Mohawk College include an assessment in the first semester to identify "high risk" students and the development of peer tutoring (Grevatt, 1992).

Multiple Strategies

In addition to the PLACe tutorial center, Miramar College considers student retention strategies part of a campus-wide collaborative development effort. The college developed a "Student Retention Strategies Handbook" which contains multiple approaches to counteract dropout (Fink and Carrasquillo, 1994). Likewise, Allegheny Community college proposed a series of intervention strategies. These included establishing a women's center to provide support to non-traditional, female students; conducting a freshman seminar to promote supportive relationships among students and student-faculty interaction; creating college funded work-study for on-campus employment; establishing a faculty development program; creating additional student organizations; and developing a freshman orientation program (Price, 1993).

Conclusion

In sum, the intervention strategies that are widely used and evidence the greatest impact include orientation programs, mentoring, and multiple strategy approaches. Since different students may require different approaches, colleges are beginning to take a more holistic approach toward persistence by implementing multiple intervention strategies. Because dropping out often has negative implications, it behooves the colleges to use one or more of these intervention strategies in order to raise retention rates while simultaneously lowering attrition rates.

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